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GREEK AND LATIN IN THE SCHOOLS OF BELGIUM¹

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Educational reform is a problem as old as Plato, and will continue to be a problem as long as education itself endures. When the problems cease troubling education itself will be a *caput mortuum*, and the need of reform will be greater than ever. There was an ancient pool, you will remember, of which it is written: "An angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had." The educational pool closely resembles that other: troubling angels are constantly needed in science, philosophy, and religion.

But the mere troubling is not enough: it must be done by one who has knowledge both of the slumbering depths and of the human ills that wait to be healed. Mere troublers—yes, we have had store enough of them from Protagoras and his fellow-sophists to their last descendants, pseudo-teachers of teaching, educational cubists, who plead for studies that strengthen the hand, not the head, for wood-carving instead of classics, burnt leather instead of literature, and agriculture instead of culture.

The movement for reform, so called, is not symptomatic of conditions in America alone. Neither are the classics the only object of attack. Everywhere, and in all departments of life, there is a revolt against accepted standards of education, of art, of morality. In education we have the prevalent fallacy that one subject of study is as good as another. In art we have Impressionists, Futurists, and Cubists, who look back upon the spirituality and sincerity of Rembrandt as things outworn. In morality the prevalent theory of Protagoras, that man is the measure of all things, and that hence each is a law to himself, leads to an individualism of conduct and belief which is incompatible with all

¹ Read at the Michigan Classical Conference, April 3, 1913.

theories of organized society and destructive of the two cardinal virtues of character-building, obedience and loyalty. Matthew Arnold's definition of philistinism is truer of our day than his own: "In things of beauty and taste, vulgarity: in things of feeling and morals, coarseness: in things of the mind and spirit, stupidity—this is philistinism." Frederic Harrison has called it the cult of the Foul:

The new craze under which we are now suffering is the cult of the Foul, or, to put it in Greek, it may be dubbed Aischrolatreia-worship or admiration of the Ugly, the Nasty, the Brutal. Poetry, Romance, Drama, Painting, Sculpture, Music, Manners, even Dress, are now recast to suit popular taste by adopting forms which hitherto have been regarded as unpleasing, gross, or actually loathsome. To be refined is to be "goody-goody"; gutter slang is "so actual"; if a ruffian tramp knifes his pal, it is "so strong." . . . Painters are warned against anything "pretty," so they dab on bright tints to look like a linoleum pattern, or they go for subjects to a thieves' kitchen. The one aim in life, as in Art, is to shock one's grandmother.¹

A part of the protest against the vulgarity and superficiality of the age is the vigorous defense of the classics in France, Belgium, and elsewhere. For all humanists believe it is a grander thing to be in spirit with the ages than in spirit with the age. Critics like Brunetière, Faguet, Poincaré, the mathematician, "Agathon," and Anatole France have been eloquent defenders of the ancient humanities because they realize that the history of the spiritual struggle and achievement of the human race is one, and the lines of demarkation between past and present fade easily away. Sane criticism looks with philosophic disdain upon time and space. It realizes that the thoughtful do not wholly live in any one time or country, but are the heritors of all the ages; that they are citizens of an ideal city which is nowhere upon this earth, and that they view all things under the form and aspect of eternity.

In Belgium the debate between the defenders of the classics and the pedagogists who would eliminate Greek from the schools, minimize Latin, and substitute modern languages and manual training is just now very keen. The bilingual character of the country and its intense commercialism threaten the stability of the

¹ Quoted by Grandgent, *Proc. Mod. Lang. Assoc.*, 1912, p. lv.

classics in a marked degree. A comprehensive scheme of reform is set forth in two bulky volumes, called *La réforme de l'enseignement*, by G. Van Overbergh, the director general of higher education (Brussels, 1906). The last and best statement of the humanist's position is that by J. P. Waltzing, professor at the University of Liège, in an address to the Deliberative Council of Secondary Education, published at Brussels, in 1913. Before discussing the proposed reforms and the position of Professor Waltzing, however, I wish to say a word about the Belgian school organization.

Belgian secondary education (*enseignement moyen*)—the only part of the system with which we are here concerned—was organized by law in 1850. It is directed by a general inspector and two subordinates, one for the humanities (ancient and modern), the other for mathematics and the sciences.¹ The secondary schools comprise (1) the *athénées*, (2) communal colleges, (3) private colleges, (4) the inferior order of secondary schools.

1. The *athénées* are day schools for boys only and stand at the head of the secondary educational system. The head master and assistant masters must have the Doctor's degree from a university, while the assistants must have a university diploma. There are twenty *athénées* at present. The course of study is arranged in three parallel sections: Latin and Greek humanities; Latin humanities; modern humanities. Each section consists of seven classes, that is, seven years of study. Latin is given 6 hours a week the first year, 7 hours the second, and 8 the remaining five years, making a total of 53 hours. Greek is not taken the first two years but is given 5 hours the remaining five years, making a total of 25 hours. This is the classical program for the Greek and Latin humanities. In the section called the Latin humanities there is no Greek, and the equivalent in time is devoted to more mathematics and sciences. In the section called modern humanities there is neither Latin nor Greek, and the equivalent in time is devoted to commercial studies.

The diploma given upon the completion of the seven years admits the student to the universities, for which most of the students are aiming. The diploma of the Greek and Latin humanities,

¹ Cf. Monroe, *Enc. Educ.*, article "Belgium."

however, is held in highest honor, admitting the holder to any department of the university. The diploma of the Latin humanities comes next, admitting the holder to the higher technical schools. The modern humanities diploma admits only to the commercial and consular sections of the Universities of Ghent and Liège.

2. Besides the *athénées* there are seven communal colleges, that is, schools under local government. These are the ecclesiastical schools.

3. There are eight private colleges.

4. The last class of secondary schools, called the lower order, has a three years' course of study devoted largely to manual training and commercial subjects. There are 88 such schools for boys and 40 for girls. Since neither Latin nor Greek is taught in them they need not concern us here.

We can gain some idea of the place of the classics in the Belgian schools from the following statistics. In 1908¹ the twenty *athénées* had a total of 5,890 students. Of these, 1,441 were enrolled in the Greek and Latin humanities; 490 in the Latin humanities; and 3,959 in the modern humanities. The seven communal colleges had a total of 727 students. Of these, 245 were enrolled in the Greek and Latin humanities; 40 in the Latin humanities; and 442 in the modern humanities. The eight private colleges had a total of 1,156 students. Of these, 1,034 were enrolled in the Greek and Latin humanities; none in the Latin humanities; and 122 in the modern humanities. Thirty-five per cent, therefore, of all these students were enrolled in the Greek and Latin humanities; 7 per cent in the Latin humanities; and 58 per cent in the modern humanities.

The latest statistics available, namely for the year 1910,² show 2,943 students in the Greek and Latin humanities; 624 in the Latin humanities; and 4,439 in the modern humanities. Therefore, 36.7 per cent were enrolled in the Greek and Latin humanities; 7.3 per cent in the Latin humanities; and 56 per cent in the modern humanities. In other words, the classics have been

¹ Monroe, *Enc. Educ.*, p. 348.

² Waltzing, *Le grec et le latin*, p. 37.

holding their own, while the modern humanities show a slight loss. This result is especially gratifying to the lovers of the classics because the attempts to break down the classical tradition have been more persistent in Belgium than anywhere else in Europe, or in America, for that matter. When we remember that 42 per cent of the population speak Flemish only, and 38.2 per cent speak French only, it is apparent that the question of modern languages is one of vital concern in that busy little country. The economic condition of the country, furthermore, calls insistently for engineers, mining experts, and leaders in the industrial arts. The debate regarding the position of the classics in the secondary schools is, for this reason, a national one, wherein both sides are sincerely actuated by an intense desire for unity of spirit and national progress.

The programs of the reformers vary considerably in detail.¹ In general, they may be summarized as follows:

1. Eliminate Greek from the Greek and Latin humanities.
2. Reduce the time devoted to Latin; some would eliminate Latin altogether but the prevailing belief is that Latin should remain.
3. Insist upon a profound study of the native language and the national literature and make them the center of the new humanities.
4. Finally, devote more time to the study of foreign languages and geography.

It may be interesting to know that a protest against the elimination of Greek and the reduction or elimination of Latin was formulated and signed by more than two hundred University professors, among them mathematicians, naturalists, physicians, and men of rank, and by more than fifteen hundred professors of the *athénées*. The protest was sent to the Deliberative Council of Secondary Education. I wonder how many American university professors—not professing classicists—would sign a document like the following:

Secondary education is passing through a crisis in our country which can escape the attention of no one. A plan of reform involving the entire program is being discussed, and the place assigned to the Greek and Latin languages and literatures is put in question. We do not wish to prejudice in any way

¹ *La reforme de l'enseignement*, I, 160-207.

the decisions which will be made by the Committee on the Reform of the Humanities, but we believe it our duty to make known our opinion on the gravest question of education, the maintenance or the suppression of the Greek and Latin humanities. We do not at all deny that the organization of our education may be susceptible of change and progress; and in regard to the details of these reforms we reserve the freedom of action and belief of each of the signers, but we are all in agreement upon the following points:

We desire to affirm, first of all, our absolute faith in the efficacy of the Greek and Latin humanities for the education of the higher classes. We have the profound conviction that it is essential to the highest interests of our country, to its intellectual, aesthetic, and moral culture, that the youth of our schools, who, one day, are destined to be the élite of the nation, remain under the influence of the literary and artistic thought of the Greeks and Romans by the study of the classical languages and literatures. No respectable interest, the economic as little as any other, can be compromised thereby. We believe, on the contrary, that the abandonment of a system of education, consecrated by the experience of several centuries, would be retrogression for our country. We demand that this sacrifice be not rashly made, especially since the chief nations which are endeavoring to extend their economic influence, Germany and England, for example, refuse to decide this grave question definitely. The great danger lies in the utilitarian spirit which is hostile to all truly disinterested study, and which tends to reduce all the problems of education to a monetary value. The school ought, undoubtedly, to prepare the young man for life, but for the whole of life, and pitiable, indeed, would be the nation where to make money should be the only ideal, where all education should be reduced to the search for the best processes of self-enrichment, whether at home or abroad; where, in the desire for material expansion, the expansion of science and intelligence should come to a halt.

To this theoretical declaration we wish to add a demand of a practical character. Without concerning ourselves here with the details of a program of studies or the method, we demand that the program of the humanities continue to take account of the essential importance of the Greek and Latin languages and literatures, that it give them a number of years and hours commensurate with their eminent worth.¹

The classics in Belgium have no better defender than Professor Waltzing. It is not my purpose to review in detail his masterly exposition of the aims and ideals of classical study. I shall merely enumerate some of the chief points of his argument. Many of them, you will perceive, have a distinctly national application. Professor Waltzing maintains that the study of Greek

¹ Waltzing, *Le grec et le latin*, pp. 7, 8.

and Latin inculcates, first of all, a disinterested love of knowledge. The modern humanities, by both their content and method of instruction, are permeated with a spirit of utilitarianism. That, in fact, is their primary appeal in the minds of many educators. In the study of Greek and Latin, on the other hand, the student is accustomed to fasten his mind upon an object considered in and for itself, and not with reference to its practical utility (p. 47). A propos of this subject, M. Poincaré, the illustrious mathematician, says:

It is by the contact with the ancient literatures that we best learn to turn aside from that which has merely a contingent and particular interest, to interest ourselves only in what is general, to aspire always to some ideal. Those who have tasted them become incapable of limiting their horizon; the external life speaks to them only of their daily interests, but they only half hear the voice; they are in haste to see something else; they carry with them everywhere the nostalgia for a better land.

And speaking of the disinterested love of knowledge, the same writer continues:

This is the spirit that breathed upon Greece in the olden times and gave rise to poets and philosophers. There remains in our classical education something or other—I know not what—of this old Greek soul, something—I know not what—which always makes us look upward. And that is more precious in the making of a savant than the reading of many volumes of geometry [p. 48].

I have dwelt upon this argument because it is one upon which we need to insist in our own academic life. Knowledge for its own sake—may we never lose sight of that!

In the second place, the study of Greek and Latin inculcates the spirit of objective criticism. “The study of the ancient world,” says Bazin, “gives us a truer idea of the present, and destroys that dangerous naïveté which leads beginners to believe that errors are progress, and that the braggadocio of the present is a new thing” (p. 50).

Third, the study of Greek and Latin develops the habit of independent work and personal judgment. The modern languages resemble each other in that they are all analytical, and are, furthermore, all the expression of the same civilization, developed since

the Middle Ages. "The Greek and Latin words differ not only from the native language as words: the composition of the idea is different: it is necessary to analyze it before it can pass into the process of translation" (p. 51).

In the fourth place, the study of Greek and Latin creates a sense of tradition and a sense of evolution, things which the modern languages cannot give (p. 55).

The charge, so often made, that Greek and Latin possess no immediate utility, is met more specifically by Professor Waltzing. Greek and Latin, he maintains, are useful, first, because they afford an unparalleled intellectual discipline; second, because they are a direct help in the mastery of the modern languages. Translation from Greek and Latin is the best school for an exact, forceful style. Third, they are almost indispensable for a mastery of French. The decline of a proper feeling and knowledge of French on the part of the younger generation of pupils is a subject that has deeply concerned French writers and teachers. This aspect of classical study was treated, as will be remembered, by Dean Effinger.¹ "The decline of French," says Emile Faguet,² has been parallel with that of Latin, and here the principle *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*, seems to me to be true." Fourth, Greek and Latin are useful, nay indispensable, for developing the literary sense and a standard of taste. In discussing this subject, as frequently elsewhere, Professor Waltzing pays tribute to Professor Kelsey's *Greek and Latin in American Education* by forceful quotations. Fifth, Greek and Latin develop character. Sixth, they are directly necessary for scholars who investigate problems in history, philosophy, religion, literature, and the like, in that no true scholar is ever content with secondary sources. Seventh, they give us our technical vocabulary in all the sciences. And finally, they are useful as an accomplishment in and for themselves, for the adornment of the mind, as the French say.

Professor Waltzing would be the last to affirm that the case of the classics rests upon any one of these arguments. The evidence is cumulative, and the opposition has yet to prove that it is

¹ *School Review*, XX, 401-6.

² *Revue des deux mondes*, September 15, 1910.

fundamentally wrong. By the opposition I do not mean the advocates of modern languages: with the thorough acquisition of modern languages I am in entire sympathy. The real opposition to the classics is the cult of the incompetent. In a recent address before the Modern Language Association,¹ Professor Grandgent maintains that the abandonment of the old tradition and the advocacy of "all that concerns practical life" has ushered in a period which he aptly calls the "Dark Ages." I draw your attention to that masterly address by the quotation of a characteristic paragraph:²

By this time it may have occurred to some of you that the Dark Age I am discussing is not the period extending from the fifth to the eleventh century, but a much nearer one. I suggest, indeed, that we alter the *Century* definition to something like this: "The Dark Ages, an epoch in the world's history, beginning with or shortly after the French Revolution, marked by a general extension and cheapening of education resulting in a vast increase of self-confident ignorance. It was induced by the gradual triumph of democracy, and will last until the masses, now become arbiters of taste and science, shall have been raised to the level formerly occupied by the privileged classes."

¹ *Proc. Mod. Lang. Assoc.*, 1912.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.